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Using the CIA for Political Advantage

Material released from the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment inquiry suggests a new avenue of investigation for the congressional intelligence inquiries now getting under way: What can be done to prevent a President from using the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other secret security services for partisan political purposes?

In summer and fall of 1971 President Nixon saw Sen. Edmund Muskie as his likely opponent in the upcoming 1972 presidential election. A number of Nixon's advisers feared Sen. Edward Kennedy might emerge as the Democratic candidate. Nixon White House

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political strategy, therefore, called for attacking both Muskie and Kennedy. The publication of the Pentagon papers in June 1971, the ensuing court battle to prevent further publication and the indictment of Daniel Ellsberg for giving the papers to the press were all viewed by the President and his aides as helping them politically.

For the attack on Edward Kennedy, Nixon wanted to publicize what he considered failures of John Kennedy's administration. On several occasions in June 1971, the President asked his aides to find a way to get out the story of the Bay of Pigs. At one point, 10 days after the first Pentagon papers publication, he suggested that Chicago Tribune reporters Willard Edwards or Walter Trohan be asked to demand release of previously classified Bay of Pigs material.

On July 2, 1971, White House aide Charles Colson told H. R. Haldeman that Hunt had been "the CIA mastermind on the Bay of Pigs. He told me," Colson went on, "that if the truth were ever known, Kennedy would be destroyed." In an attached telephone conversation transcript, Hunt said "I've written my memoirs of that (the Bay of Pigs), but of course, I never published them."

Four days later Hunt was hired and two days after that, on July 9, 1971, according to notes taken by John Ehrlichman at a White House meeting, President Nixon suggested that Look magazine might be a suitable place to publish "Hunt's memoirs." In that same presidential conversation, Mr. Nixon discussed naming Gen. Vernon Walters as the number two man in the CIA—a move that was not accom-

plished until 10 months later. The President also talked about another former CIA agent, Lucien Conien, who had been active in Saigon for the agency during the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem. Hunt and Colson had talked to Conien that same day asking about the Diem assassination and the roles of Averell Harriman, Maxwell Taylor and Robert Kennedy. Thereafter Nixon asked John Ehrlichman to keep tabs on Conien, whose anti-Kennedy story they wanted the CIA to release.

At an impromptu press conference September 16, 1971, Mr. Nixon declared that the U.S. involvement in Vietnam developed "through overthrowing Diem and the complicity in the murder plan of Diem." Two days later, at a White House meeting with Haldeman, Ehrlichman and then-Attorney General John Mitchell, Nixon talked about a political strategy that would keep discussion of the origins of the Vietnam war "front and center" so that Democrats would "squabble about it." The "Diem incident" was picked as "the best ground" for attack since it involved both Harriman, who was considered a Muskie supporter, and Kennedy. Mr. Nixon suggested Republican senators, such as William Brock of Tennessee or Robert Taft of Ohio, could pick up his accusation of three days earlier and "demand Conien be released from the silence" imposed on him by CIA regulations. "Let the CIA take a whipping on this," former President Nixon reportedly said.

Mr. Nixon then ordered that several specific steps be taken concerning the CIA to carry out the strategy of getting the story of the Diem murder out. He wanted the "entire Diem file" from the CIA. His aides were to tell CIA the story that his answer of three days earlier had been questioned and he wanted to prepare for an upcoming press conference. In addition the CIA was told to deliver the "full" Bay of

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Pigs file to the White House "or else." There also was to be a "speed-up (of) Walters to CIA" at Mr. Nixon's specific request.

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at delivering files, the President's men fabricated two stories. On the Bay of Pigs, they would say that since Mr. Nixon himself "was involved" he must know all the facts." CIA Director Richard Helms was also to be told "the President is on CIA's side in these ... (but) as questions arise they must be answered."

That same day a decision was made to request all State Department cables on the Diem coup. The President's name was to be kept out of it; the handling of the request and reading of the cables would be left to others, including Howard Hunt.

The assignment did go to Hunt who, on September 20, 1971, was given access to State's cable file on the Diem coup. The CIA, however, did not fully respond to the President's request as relayed by Ehrlichman. Instead, Director Helms asked to speak directly to Mr. Nixon. At this point it is worth recalling that Helms and his agency had in the previous few months been subjected to a variety of White House requests. In early July they had been asked to do a psychological profile of Ellsberg; later that month and the

next they had responded to requests from Hunt for false identification papers, a wig, a tape recorder and finally a clandestine camera. Also, at about the same time, the agency undertook physical surveillance of newsmen at White House request. The only instance in which the agency is known to have balked occurred when Hunt's use of the clandestine camera—with which he took interior pictures of Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office—indicated a covert domestic operation was being contemplated. At that point the CIA apparently halted its aid to Hunt.

For the meeting with Helms, Mr. Nixon was to be firm that he wanted to see "all of the documents requested," according to a memo prepared by Ehrlichman. The former President was to "avoid promising" that only he would look at them or "that none will be declassified or released."

Helms met with Mr. Nixon on Oct. 8, 1971. After discussing some problems of CIA cooperation with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, they came to the main purpose of the meeting. Mr. Nixon told Helms a false story. He said his request for the Bay of Pigs and Diem files was based on the idea that he "must be fully advised in order to know what to duck" in the way of questions that might arise at international meetings already planned to take place in 1972. The former Presi-

dent added, somewhat disingenuously, that he would not "hurt the agency nor attack (his) predecessors."

CIA Director Helms apparently caught the drift of Mr. Nixon's remarks, for he responded that there "is only one President at a time" and, as of that day, "I only work for you." That having been said, Helms turned over an additional envelope of documents. The President then said that Helms was to deal with Ehrlichman "as you would me," to which Ehrlichman added, "I'll be making requests for additional material." Helms apparently responded: "OK, anything."

In the following days Hunt worked over the State Department cables, but there is no recorded testimony about whether he saw the CIA material turned over to Mr. Nixon. Since no single cable tied the Kennedy administration to the Diem coup or assassination—as Mr. Nixon had charged in his press conference—Hunt fabricated one. It was thereafter decided that the phony cable, along with genuine ones, were to be shown to Life magazine writer William Lambert in the hope that a major story supportive of Mr. Nixon's charge could be promoted.

Lambert and Hunt met, the cables were shown, but both say no story developed. Lambert was suspicious and Hunt refused to let him have a copy of the fabricated cable. There is some indication that during this period the CIA asked for a delay in giving Lambert additional information.

The Diem episode nonetheless amply illustrates how a President can manipulate and mislead an agency for his own political purposes while cloaking his actions in some vague but reasonable excuse. Should CIA Director Helms have realized he was being used? Probably—and there is good reason to believe his initial caution arose from a concern that he was. But faced with a direct presidential request—and assurances—he did what he was asked to do.

An incident such as this in no way excuses what Helms later did in 1972 and 1973, covering up from legitimate congressional and Justice Department inquiries information on Watergate matters in both his agency and his own possession. Quite the contrary. Having been exposed to the duplicity of the Nixon White House he should have welcomed an opportunity to tell the whole truth.

Perhaps a legislative limitation on the release of intelligence files or some guidance in an agency's charter would inhibit future White House requests or automatic agency director compliance. The only final guarantee that such misuse of CIA or any agency won't take place must rest in the characters of the men most directly involved: first and foremost, the President; and then the men who run these sensitive agencies.